

Media Independents Push for Access

Marita Sturken

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“Independent” is a term which is often misused. In the independent video and film community, while there is always controversy over who is and who isn’t, “independent” can essentially be defined by one factor: editorial control. The independents are those who choose to control the distribution and production of their works despite the monopolization of film exhibition by the commercial film industry, and despite corporate control of public television.

Recent events suggest that many independent producers are no longer willing to rely on a few state and federal funding organizations to provide paltry budgets for their existence, or to be paid a fraction of the going rate to have the “privilege” of showing their works on public television. With the reorganization of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) by Congress, and the formation of some promising organizations which are now looking beyond public funding to the prospect of obtaining substantial corporate funding and of beginning to lobby effectively in Washington, the political situation of the independent community has drastically changed over the past few years, and especially over the past few months.

“We want Congress to hear a cry of support,” says Bob Haller, director of Anthology Film Archives in New York. “We want them to acknowledge that, given that the media is one of the most important factors of our community, if independents do not receive support, the public will crumble.” Crumble or not, it seems likely that the public is going to hear from the independent film and video community, if it hasn’t already.

HOW PUBLIC IS PUBLIC TV?

Certainly, one factor in this growth in independent political strength is what Richard Goldstein of the Village Voice has called “the city’s most effective artist lobby,” the Association of Independent Video and Filmmakers (AIVF). AIVF is the only organization which represents nonallied, independent video and film producers and directors. It is also the only such organization which has been able to exercise effective political clout in Washington. Says Goldstein, “AIVF effectively lobbies against the alliance between big oil and big culture that dominates public television. It prods the Carnegie Commission and pushes Congress toward a greater emphasis on community control.”

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting is now being reorganized (with consultation from AIVF) with a proposed network of three broadcast signals, the establishment of a Program Fund, and the creation of a five year plan as major aspects of the organization. The Carnegie Commission report, published last year as *A Public Trust*, was sharply critical of public TV, and has had a substantial influence on CPB’s reorganization plans. What does the Carnegie report and the reorganization of CPB really mean for independents?

The question is still unanswered, but two things are definite: there will be significantly the new division of CPB which will deal solely with the selection and funding of programming, under the guidance of the CPB board. Freedman has taken the design of policy concerning independent producers into his own hands after several months of debate and discussion with representatives from the independent community. One key factor in this policy will be the percentage of the program fund which will be set aside for independents. When Congress mandated that a “substantial” proportion of funds be used for independent productions, that was interpreted by independents to mean 50%, but is likely to mean less to CPB.

The discussion over the reorganization of CPB's independent policy has involved much debate over definitions. In early December AIVF made a presentation before the CPB board on the behalf of independent producers. The speakers included Alan Jacobs, executive director of AIVF, and independents Fern McBride, Steve Wax, and Bob Van Lierop. The AIVF committee was presented with a revised proposal draft drawn up by the CPB staff for CPB board approval. "This draft had theoretically been revised through consultation with independent producers," Jacobs wrote in *The Independent*, AIVF's newsletter. "Yet we were unable to find that input reflected in a paper which we, at least, were seeing for the first time. As presented in the draft, the definition of independent producers is so broad as to jeopardize the gains and promise of Congress's three-year funding bill."

With the possibility that a "Qualified Producer's List" will be set up as a reference to determine independent funding, definitions become important. AIVF would like to see "independents" defined as "those persons who are not regularly employed by any corporation, network, institution, or agency which determines the form or the content of the materials which he or she produces."

AIVF would also like to see funding go directly to independents rather than being filtered through individual PBS stations. "The availability of increased government funding for independents is not going to change the stations' programming bias," Jacobs wrote. "Putting money in their hands would be equivalent to putting independents on the staff. We would be enlisted to produce more 'mainstream' programming and would find considerably less support for self-initiated work."

Other important aspects of AIVF's proposal to CPB are the use of peer-review panels for all independent proposals; the establishment of a community advisory committee "whose task would be to make recommendations as to the funding priorities of the various program areas"; the compilation of a "comprehensive mailing list," to be regularly updated and published, consisting of a national constituency of independent producers who would also nominate candidates for the panels; a substantial effort to build promotional support for independent programming; an improved solicitation process; increased involvement of minorities in decision-making; and finally, that CPB recognize that "editorial control is of paramount importance if artists are to be a respected ingredient in the future of CPB."

At WNET-Channel 13, New York's public TV station, two important elements of the policy are being put to the test: the peer-review panel and editorial control. The independent video and filmmaking community has joined forces with gay, black, and Hispanic community organizations to protest the rejection by WHET of four panel-chosen films for that station's "Independent Focus" series. These organizations have formed the Coalition To Make Public Television Public, which consists of: AIVF, National Gay Task Force, Puerto Rican Institute for Media Advocacy, Women Make Movies, Third World Newsreel, Asian Cine Vision, Center For Documentary Media, Black Producers Association, National Association of Lesbian and Gay Filmmakers, March On Washington Committee for Lesbian and Gay Rights, Independent Feature Project, Alternative Cinema Conference, and the Film Fund.

"Independent Focus" was established three years ago as a showcase for independent films not made specifically for television. This season an impressive peer-review panel selected the program, which included some of the most innovative work ever seen on public TV. The panel, which was assembled by producer Marc Weiss, consisted of Eric Breitbard, associate director of the Film Forum; Vicky Gholson, an independent producer and a member of the Carnegie Commission; Barbara Kopple, producer/director of *Harlan County USA*; Al Levin, Channel 13's public affairs producer and documentary filmmaker; Julio Paton, a community project director; Greta Schiller, an independent producer; and William Sloan, head film librarian of the New York Public Library.

Liz Oliver, then manager of acquisitions for WHET (and now manager of independent acquisitions) vetoed four

of the 28 films selected, without consulting the panel. The decision to axe the four films, Oliver told the panel, "is not related to content." She added that "it was never the intent to place the programming of the series at the absolute discretion of the panel." According to Bill Sloan, "Channel 13 can handle radical content but not when it's wedded to radical style." The coalition found that Oliver's answers "did not address editorial policy or station broadcast criteria but gave only personal objections."

The four films rejected are certainly examples of films incorporating radical styles. Finally Got the News is a documentary by Stew Bird about Marxist attempts to organize black workers; Robert Van Lierop's 0 Povo Organizado is a militant black film set in Mozambique; Jan Oxenberg's A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts is an exploration of cliched images of lesbian women; and The Chicago Maternity Story, by Kartemquin Films, concerns the quality of health care available to poor women. According to the filmmakers, Oliver had discussed changing this last film "in order to make it acceptable for WNET," before she rejected it.

The Coalition and panel members met with Jay Iselin, the president of WNET, on Feb. 11, and presented their demands: that the four films be aired in prime time, that WNET establish an office of ombudsperson to act as an intermediary between the independent and minority communities and Channel 13, that WNET open its books to public scrutiny, that they implement the recommendations of the Minority Task Force (a CPB-commissioned consulting committee) in hiring more members of minorities, that they give the Coalition air time to present its views, and that they give the Coalition a chance to present its case at their next board meeting in March. These rather predictable demands were met by predictable responses: that, in Iselin's words, "if we give you an hour everyone else will want one"; that meeting the demands would reduce Channel 13 to the status of a common carrier (an indiscriminate relay of information); that money is tight; and that Channel 13 had developed the peer panel on its own initiative.

The Coalition was not stopped by these responses. They organized a demonstration outside of WNET's "Gala of Stars" at Lincoln Center on Feb. 24. The protest, while hampered by police, who moved it across the street, included some of the most respected producers and directors of past WNET programs, including Jack Willis, former program director for 13, and a three-time Emmy winner; Crane Davis, former producer and host of the former 13 production The 51st State; and George Stoney, a New York University professor and independent filmmaker.

These actions by the Coalition produced a great deal of discussion in the New York press on how Channel 13's money is spent just as the station launched its annual pledge week and membership drive. "This year, the management of WNET-13 will privately decide how to spend approximately \$20-million in public funds," says the Coalition. "There is no requirement that they disclose how this money is actually spent. Instead the public is offered the assurance that 80 cents of every budget dollar goes to programming and related costs . . . A recent internal document from the station indicated that less than 25 cents of each public discretionary (not committed to specific use) dollar is spent on direct costs of program production and acquisition. By comparison, almost 30 cents of each dollar is spent in an effort to raise even more money," through Pledge Week and other fundraising efforts.

WNET's "fiscal artistry," Crane Davis told the Soho Weekly News, "ends up with dollars donated by corporations calling the programming shots, while public funds are used to pay the nuts and bolts costs of operating Channel 13."

But what of the films which are being shown in the "Independent Focus" series? They are certainly not typical public TV fare, and do not deserve to be overshadowed by the controversy. Charles Burnett's Killer of Sheep, a narrative cinema-verite film about a black community in Los Angeles; Larry Adelman's indictment of multi-national corporations, Controlling Interests; and Jody Eiseman's documentary on victims of Agent

Orange, War Shadows, among others, are films which stand out for their radical content and approach. "They are sort of anti 'the good film,'" Sloan told representatives of WNET, "the so-called well-structured film that Channel 13 has always gone after. They represent the sensibility that radical filmmakers are working in."

Will the controversy at WNET endanger the use of peer-review panels in the impending CPB policy for independents? "The WNET situation points to the problem of not respecting the panel's opinions," says John Rice. "There is always going to be tension. That's inevitable, but it's very important to note that those films are not the kind of films Liz Oliver would have picked. AIVF is hoping that the Program Fund will utilize peer panels." With Lewis Freedman and the CPB five-year plan all slotted for spring premieres, the independents are staying turned.

COALESCING FOR CLOUT

Whereas the '70s seems to have been the decade of the emergence of media arts organizations and independent video and filmmakers, the '80s may very well be the decade in which these organizations join together and acquire some political clout.

Public television is only one area in which independents are pushing for change. In an effort to break down "the barrier to viable independent distribution and production," a group of independent feature filmmakers have formed the Independent Feature Project "to advocate, support, lobby, and organize for independent features," says Joy Pereths, the association's new director.

The new association is the outgrowth of several events, including the formation of the Independent Feature Project under the Film Fund in New York (which is the predecessor to the organization), and the very successful "American independents" program of independent features, shown at the New York Film Festival in September, 1979. A marketplace of independent features was also held, concurrent with the festival, for foreign television buyers, distributors, major European exhibitors, and American art cinema exhibitors. Prior to the festival, filmmakers met with government arts administrators, private funders, exhibitors, and distributors, and formed a steering committee to create a national membership organization.

One direct result of the conference was the commissioning of 30 working papers by experts on virtually all aspects of independent distribution and exhibition. The resulting papers have been collected in a book called The Conference Working Papers, which is available from the Project for \$14.00. The steering committee will meet again in March to formalize the organization and present a charter, at which point the Association of Independent Feature Producers will be formed.

A major goal of the association, according to Pereths, will be to act as a "clearinghouse of information." This will include publishing a newsletter, and researching and producing a regularly updated, comprehensive catalogue of American independent features to serve as a programming and marketing reference. The association also intends to act as a liaison for numerous foreign film festival directors and television buyers, and there is discussion of a possible affiliation with AIVF, which performs a similar function. It will also lobby for legislation which would encourage private investments in independent features. Plans for this year include another film market and a second American Independents Festival, which would travel after opening in New York.

"The efforts of a number of independent filmmakers to self-distribute have started to build a national network," says Pereths, "but these films are few and far between. The project has the direct experience of distributing its members' films. It has the structure for these filmmakers to share their information on self-distribution, and to make that information available."

The most impressive aspect of Brie project is the success it has had even before its formal inception. For example, six independent features opened in New York in February and March at major cinema theaters. As a result of the project's market, many American independent features have been sold to foreign television, and to foreign and American distributors. Pereths compares the alternative distribution network to a political campaign, and says that grass-roots organizing is crucial to "supporting a regional American cinema that expressed diverse points of view and is not dominated by commercial considerations."

While AIVF and the Project represent non-allied videomakers and filmmakers, most of the other new alliances represent media organizations. The National Conference of Media Arts Centers will be held in Boulder, Colo. on May 29-31 to establish the National Alliance of Media Arts Centers (NAMAC). The conference is the result of a meeting held in Minnewaska, N.Y. in April 1979. Representatives from 47 media arts centers participated in the conference, which was organized by the Foundation for Independent Video and Film (FIVF), a sister organization of AIVF. The steering committee of the Minnewaska conference has published a report which outlines the major issues and papers presented last spring. Regional meetings have also been held in the Ohio Valley, Philadelphia, Boulder, and the South. A New York Meeting is scheduled April 21 at the Millennium Film Workshop.

The main purpose of NAMAC will be to create a lobbying advocacy group, according to Bob Halter, who is chairman of the steering committee. In addition to this lobby, NAMAC, says Halter, will concern itself with educating corporations, foundations, local educational units (such as high schools), libraries, and printed media about the importance of independent media. The committee hopes that NAMAC can be supported by dues and a few small grants, with an annual budget of \$30-40,000. It will not have a full-time staff, but instead a series of committees who will work on specific projects. Plans also include electing a board of 13 people in May, consisting of one representative from each of 11 regions and two members at large. Elections would be held on a staggered basis every two years. The Boulder conference is being supported by several grants which Haller says cannot be disclosed at present, but it will cost \$100 per organization. It is open to anyone who represents a non-profit center for film or video.

A significant effort has been made by the committee to insure a wide geographical range and significant representation by minorities. It is obvious that the large and diverse group that will probably meet in Boulder will be a powerful and contentious one. If NAMAC raises the possibility of achieving significantly more funding for media arts centers, as Haller says it will, how will that money be administered or divided without creating more bureaucratic structures, or strengthening those structures that already exist?

The resolutions of the Minnewaska conference state that the minimum fee paid to a visiting artist for public appearances should be \$200 plus travel expenses. While they agree that it is well deserved, many organizations simply cannot afford to pay that, says Michael Rothbard of Inter-Media Arts Center. One goal of NAMAC would be to help media arts centers to minimize unnecessary duplication in the field, such as combining efforts for visiting artist programs and program notes, says Haller. Certainly the communication aspect of this and other newly-formed alliances is paramount.

In New York State, two organizations have emerged which, while they are not directly affiliated with NAMAC, share some of the same goals and potential membership. The New York Media Alliance (NYMA), which represents media centers which deal specifically with electronic arts, has elected a board (see the March issue of Afterimage), and is now in the process of incorporating. The NYMA, according to Rothbard, one of the board members, is the outgrowth of the realization by the media organizations about two years ago that funding patterns were changing on the state level. It was "painfully obvious that there was no real support outside of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the New York State Council of the Arts (NYSCA)." The need to become "mature" and not depend on one funding source was not apparent. That majority, says Rothbard,

“means defending and protecting yourself, and making yourself understood.”

For the NYMA, being understood means-as it does for NAMAC-educating potential funding sources and the public about electronic media and the development of the field as an art form, “in the hope that the ‘80s is for video,” says Rothbard. The board of the NYMA will meet several times this spring to formulate a plan of action. Rothbard is confident that the board will be productive. As he says, “every person on that board is someone who has gotten extraordinary things done.”

The counterpart to the Media Alliance is the Conference of New York Independent Filmmakers, which consists of about 40 organizations. The Conference evolved from a grant which the Center for Arts Information received from NEA to provide special services for independent filmmakers. In the fall of 1977, 13 New York City organizations met to talk about forming a resource directory, and saw a need to meet on a regular basis. This year upstate film organizations were added, and meetings have included presentations and discussions with Jean Firstenberg, the new director of the American Film Institute, the Corporate Fund for Dance, the Theater Development Fund, and the Arts and Business Council with the Corporations Contribution office. The Conference is not officially incorporated, nor does there seem to be a need for it to become incorporated. According to Ellen Thurston of the Center for Arts Information, it is intended to be a forum for discussion and communication.

It is interesting to note that of the 40 film organizations, only six are outside of the Greater Metropolitan area, and only two are from upper New York State (Media Study/Buffalo, and Upstate Films, in Rhinebeck). This is in distinct contrast to the Media Alliance which seems to represent organizations fairly evenly spread throughout the state. Why is independent film so scarcely represented in the smaller cities and nonurban areas of the state as compared to electronic media? Perhaps this really will be the decade for video.